The Morning After and the Adidas Shoot

—"Do I need to pretend to be someone else?"

LYKN - Fly High

Est woke to light.

Lego's bedroom. The white sheets. The chamomile still faint in the air. Est didn't move. He lay on his side, facing the center of the bed. His eyes were open. His breathing was quiet.

And across the bed—Hong and Lego.

They were still asleep. Or rather—they were in the space between asleep and awake, the liminal zone where the body had woken but the mind hadn't yet decided to follow.

Hong was on his back, turned slightly toward the center of the bed. His gray hair was spread across the pillow—the chemical silver catching the morning light and turning it into something softer, something that looked almost natural. His face was bare—the studio makeup removed by Lego's hands last night, the skin underneath pale, the features softer without the camera's rim lighting to carve them into sharpness.

The dark circles were visible. The tension in the jaw was absent. He looked—young.

His hand was around Lego's waist.

Not on top of the pajama shirt—under it. His fingers were against Lego's skin, resting on the lower back, the contact direct and warm and entirely without self-consciousness.

As Est watched, Hong's hand moved. Not consciously. Not deliberately. But automatically—a slow, circular motion, the fingers tracing a pattern on Lego's back, the gesture so gentle and so automatic that it was clear this was not a conscious action but a habit.

Lego was leaning against Hong's chest. His cheek pressed against the hoodie that Hong had slept in—the same black hoodie from yesterday, pulled on after the face mask, after the skincare. Lego's hand—the long-nailed hand was touching Hong's ear. The fingers tracing the curve of the earlobe.

Slowly.

Gently.

The way someone touches a thing they love without thinking about the touching, the way the touching has become so fundamental to the relationship that it

happens below the level of conscious thought. This was not a performance.

No one was watching.

Except Est.

And Est was watching with a different quality of attention than usual. Not the cataloging observation he performed at parties and studios, not the scanning he'd been doing for weeks, looking for the blur, looking for the tattoo, looking for the answer to the question that had been sitting in his chest since the morning after.

This was different.

The intimacy was not for an audience. Not for Instagram, not for the group chat, not for the narrative that the internet constructed from fragments of other people's lives. This was the thing that happened when no one was looking. The thing that was real precisely because it wasn't being documented.

The tenderness between Hong and Lego was not romantic in the way that Est understood romance—not the grand gestures, not the declarations, not the performance of devotion that he had spent three years executing with Kai. This was something else. Something quieter. Something that existed in the space between friendship and love.

Est felt something move in his chest.

Not jealousy. Not exactly. Jealousy was wanting what someone else had. This was—Envy.

The clean kind. The kind that said: I want that too.

Not Hong. Not Lego. Not the specific people or the specific relationship. But the kind of connection they had. The intimacy that didn't require explanation. The touch that wasn't transactional. The morning that wasn't a photo opportunity.

Could he ever have this?

The question arrived unbidden.

Could he ever have a relationship that didn't ask for anything in return? A touch that wasn't documented? A morning that wasn't staged? A body beside his that was there because it wanted to be, not because a contract required it or an audience expected it or the machinery of his career demanded the performance of connection?

He had had Kai. Three years. And Kai had been—a transaction. A negotiation. A performance of love that looked, from the outside, like the real thing but felt, from the inside, like the suit from yesterday—expensive, well-tailored, beautiful to look

at, but fundamentally uncomfortable. Cold. Constricting. A thing designed to make him look a certain way rather than to make him feel a certain way.

He had had his parents. The birthday texts that arrived precisely on time and contained precisely the right words and conveyed precisely nothing. The emails that asked about his career and never asked about his heart. The relationship that functioned perfectly as long as he didn't need anything from it, as long as he remained the bright, independent child who solved his own problems and didn't burden anyone with the messy reality of having feelings.

And now he had—this. Hong and Lego and Nut and Tui and William. The group. But even this—even the warmth of Lego's kitchen and the cigarettes on the balcony and the way Nut's hand had landed on his shoulder.—even this felt temporary.

Because Est was still looking. Still scanning. Still trying to solve the mystery of the person who had touched him with reverence and asked before touching and left a memory so strong that Est's body remembered it even when his mind couldn't.

The search had become an anchor. A psychological anchor. A reason to come back.

If he was looking for the person from that night, he had a reason to accept Hong's invitations, attend Lego's shows, visit Nut's studio, sit on balconies, eat pad thai, watch the sky turn from gold to violet to the deep blue-black of night.

The search gave him permission to stay.

But what happened when the search ended?

The question was sharp. Uncomfortable.

If he found the person—if the blur resolved into a face, if the mystery ended, if the answer arrived—did his reason for staying also end?

And if he never found the person—if the memory remained fragmentary, if the answer never came—would he eventually have to admit that he was using the search as an excuse, as a cover story for the deeper, more vulnerable truth that he simply wanted to belong and didn't know how to ask for belonging without offering something in exchange?

The fear was there. Present. Real.

He wanted to be a part of this. He wanted the cigarettes and the sunsets and the laughter and the silences and the mornings where people touched each other's ears without thinking about it.

He wanted it regardless of who had touched his jaw that night. But wanting it didn't mean he deserved it. Wanting it didn't mean he could keep it.

He felt like a thief.

Stealing the affection. Stealing the warmth. Stealing the mornings and the meals and the care that Lego offered with such generosity and that Est accepted with such hunger and that he couldn't repay because he didn't know how to repay, didn't know what currency this economy operated in, didn't know what people wanted from him beyond his face and his body and the brand value his name carried.

Even his strange friendship with Hong sometimes felt like pity. Hong had seen him alone and was now holding him here until Est could find people for himself. Until the search was over and he could be integrated into the actual group. How long did that usually take? How long was the audition period?

The peace of the morning broke gently.

Est's phone vibrated on the nightstand—a single, soft buzz.

The sound was small, but in the silence it traveled.

Hong's eyes opened.

Not slowly—instantly. His eyes found Est's across the width of the bed. Three seconds of eye contact. Long enough to communicate: I see you. You're awake. I'm awake. We're both here.

"Good morning." Hong said. His voice was rough—the morning voice.

His hand was still on Lego's back. Still under the shirt. Still tracing the slow circles that his body had been making without permission from his conscious mind.

"Good morning." Est said.

And then Lego stirred.

The waking was gradual—the opposite of Hong's. His eyes opened. Brown. Warm. Slightly unfocused, the pupils still adjusting to the light. They found Hong first, and the recognition resolved into a smile. The small, private. Then his eyes found Est.

No surprise. No embarrassment. No hurried withdrawal from Hong's chest, no removal of the hand from Hong's ear, no performance of propriety or boundary or the social script that said three men in a bed required explanation.

Lego simply looked at Est and settled back into Hong's arms.

Unashamed. Unhurried.

His hand found Hong's ear again, the fingertip resuming its slow tracing of the earlobe, the ritual continuing where it had left off.

"What should we have for breakfast?" Lego asked, addressing no one in particular, the question floating into the room like a dandelion seed looking for a place to land.

"Anything that isn't a brownie," Hong said. "My teeth still taste like chocolate."

"Your teeth taste like chocolate because you ate four brownies."

"Three."

"Four. I counted."

Lego stretched—the full-body stretch, the kind that engaged every muscle, the spine arching, the arms extending, the legs pointing, the stretch lasting three full seconds before he collapsed back against Hong's chest with a satisfied sigh.

"Pancakes." Lego announced.

"You don't eat pancakes." Hong said.

"I eat one pancake. A small one. And then I eat fruit. And then I steal your coffee."

"You always steal my coffee."

"Your coffee tastes better."

"It's the same coffee."

"It's yours. That makes it better."

Est watched this exchange with the attention he usually reserved for scripts and contracts and the legal documents that Dana made him sign. He was trying to understand the rules. The implicit rules that governed this relationship. He wanted to learn this language.

But he didn't know where to start.

They got up.

Lego disappeared into the bathroom first, the sound of water running and a song being hummed—something Thai, something sweet, the melody familiar but unidentifiable—filtering through the closed door. Hong sat on the edge of the bed, his feet on the floor, his elbows on his knees. The face mask from last night had dried completely overnight, the edges peeling away from his skin like old wallpaper. He reached up and pulled it off in one piece.

"You were watching us." Hong said. Not a question. A statement.

Est considered lying. Considered deflecting. Considered deploying the social script

that said I just woke up or I wasn't really paying attention or any of the other polite fictions that people used to pretend they hadn't witnessed intimacy.

But this was Hong. Hong who valued honesty over politeness. Hong who treated lies like personal insults.

"Yes." Est said.

No elaboration. No justification. Just the acknowledgment.

Hong looked at him. The dark eyes were clear now—the sleep gone, the focus restored, the person behind the eyes fully present.

"And?" Hong asked.

"And… I was thinking about languages." Est said.

"Languages."

"The kind that isn't spoken. The kind that happens—" Est gestured vaguely at the bed, at the space where Hong and Lego had been tangled together, at the evidence of a conversation that had been happening entirely through touch. "—like that."

Hong was quiet for a moment. Processing. Deciding how much to say.

"What did you hear?" Hong asked.

The question was surprisingly gentle. Not defensive. Not performative. Just—curious. Genuinely wanting to know what Est had understood from witnessing something that hadn't been meant for an audience.

"Something I've never heard before." Est said.

Hong nodded slowly. The nod that said: I understand. I believe you. That answer is sufficient.

"He holds my ear," Hong said. His voice was quieter now, the register shifting from morning-rough to something more deliberate, more careful. "He's been doing it since we met. I think it started as a joke—something about my ears being too big, about them sticking out, about me looking like a cartoon character—and then it just… stayed. Became a thing. Now he does it in his sleep. I don't think he even knows he's doing it most of the time. It's just—automatic. His hand finds my ear and the world makes sense."

"Your ears aren't too big." Est said.

"I know. But don't tell him that. He'll find something else to hold. My nose. My chin. Some other body part that he's decided is disproportionate or amusing or worthy of his specific brand of affectionate criticism."

"Would that be bad?" Est asked.

"It would be different. And different is—" Hong paused. Considered. "Complicated."

The bathroom door opened. Lego emerged in a cloud of steam and the scent of expensive face wash—the kind that came in minimalist packaging and cost more per ounce than gold. His face was pink from hot water and scrubbing. His hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail. He was wearing the same pink pajamas from last night, the oversized shirt falling off one shoulder.

He looked at Hong and Est sitting on the bed, the two of them having what was clearly a Conversation with a capital C, and he smiled.

"Are we having deep talks before breakfast?" Lego asked.

They made breakfast together.

The kitchen, in the morning light, was different from the kitchen of last night. The evidence of the evening's cooking had been cleared—the counters wiped, the pots washed, the surfaces returned to their original state of Lego-chaos: expensive appliances arranged without logic, a jar of organic honey shaped like a bear, a refrigerator covered in magnets from places Lego's sister had traveled. Post-it notes with reminders: "Eat more vegetables." "47." "Call Mom." "Buy face masks."

Lego opened the refrigerator, and Est understood immediately that Lego's relationship with food was not like other people's relationship with food.

The refrigerator was—a fruit market.

Strawberries in a glass container. Blueberries. Mango, pre-sliced. Dragonfruit. Kiwi. Grapes in three colors—red, green, black—each bunch washed and ready to eat. A shelf of small glass bottles containing different teas—jasmine, oolong, chrysanthemum—each one labeled in Lego's handwriting with the date it was made and the optimal temperature for serving.

A container of mixed nuts. A carton of oat milk. A bottle of kombucha. Several small jars of what looked like homemade jam.

Very little protein. Almost no processed food. Nothing that came in a box or a can or a plastic wrapper promising convenience.

"I have oatmeal," Lego said, pulling containers from shelves with the efficiency of a person who knew exactly where everything was despite the apparent chaos. "And banana pancake mix. And fruit. Too much fruit. My sister sent another box and I can't eat it all before it goes bad."

"Your sister sends you fruit?" Hong asked. He was leaning against the counter, his coffee already made—pulled from the expensive espresso machine that sat on the counter like a small, gleaming monument to Italian engineering.

"She sends me everything. Last week it was face masks and a cashmere scarf. This week it's a box of Japanese strawberries that cost more than my phone bill. Next week it'll probably be a small car. She has no sense of proportion."

"Your sister has a spending problem." Hong observed.

"My sister has a love language problem. Her love language is 'FedEx.' She expresses affection through expedited shipping." Lego smiled—the affectionate smile, the smile of someone who had been overwhelmed by gesture and had learned to translate it into understanding. "She lives in Paris. She feels guilty. So she buys things."

"Does the guilt go away?" Est asked.

Lego paused. His hands stilled on the fruit containers. "No," he said. "But the strawberries are really good, so it's okay."

They cooked.

Or rather—Lego cooked while Hong supervised from the counter with his coffee and Est stood awkwardly near the sink wondering what his role was supposed to be in this domestic choreography.

Lego handed him a bowl. "Mix the pancake batter." Est took the bowl. Looked at the contents. Mashed banana, flour, a splash of oat milk, a pinch of cinnamon. "Just mix it," Lego said, reading his hesitation. "You can't mess it up."

Est mixed the batter. The motion was simple—the whisk moving through the flour and egg and mashed banana, the ingredients combining, the transformation from separate things to unified thing happening under his hands. Hong was criticizing the batter consistency while eating strawberries directly from the container with his bare hands.

"It's too thick." Hong said.

"It's perfect." Lego said.

"It's thick. Look at it. It's practically dough."

"Thick batter makes fluffy pancakes."

"Are you helping or criticizing?" Lego asked, not looking away from the stove.

"Can't I do both?"

"Not while your hands are covered in strawberry juice."

"Have you ever made pancakes?" Lego asked, pouring batter into the pan, the golden mixture spreading into an imperfect circle.

"No." Est said.

"Never?"

"My parents didn't cook."

The sentence landed in the kitchen like a small stone.

Lego looked at him with an expression that was part curiosity, part concern. "What did you eat growing up?"

"Prepared food. Delivered food. The housekeeper cooked sometimes, but mostly we ate things that came already made. My parents worked. They didn't have time for cooking."

"Did they have time for eating?" Hong asked.

"Sometimes. Usually we ate separately. Different schedules. Different needs."

"That sounds lonely." Lego said quietly.

It had been lonely. Est had spent most of his childhood eating dinner alone at a table designed for eight, the housekeeper's footsteps echoing in the next room, the silence of the house so complete that he could hear his own chewing. But he hadn't thought of it as lonely at the time. He had thought of it as normal. As the way life worked for bright, independent children whose parents were important and busy and who trusted their son to take care of himself.

The pancakes came out misshapen. Irregular. The kind of pancakes that would never appear in a cookbook or on Instagram but that tasted exactly right—sweet from the banana, warm from the pan, the edges slightly crispy, the center soft.

The fruit—strawberries, blueberries, mango—was arranged on plates with the excessive care that Lego applied to everything, the colors coordinated, the presentation suggesting that someone had spent time thinking about beauty even in something as simple as breakfast.

They sat at the table. Three plates, three cups, the morning light coming through the windows and turning the white kitchen into something that looked like a photograph, like the kind of domestic scene that appeared in magazines under headlines like "The Art of Slow Living" or "Mornings That Matter."

Except this wasn't a photograph. This was real. This was happening. This was three people eating imperfect pancakes in comfortable silence, the kind of silence that

didn't need to be filled because the being-together was enough.

And then—mid-bite, without announcement—Lego reached across the table, picked up Hong's coffee cup, took a sip, and set it back down.

Hong looked at him. "That's mine."

"I know."

"You have your own tea."

"Tea and coffee are different."

"Then make coffee."

"Your coffee is better."

"It's the same coffee. From the same machine. Using the same beans."

"I'm going to keep stealing it." Lego said.

"I know you are."

"And you're going to let me."

"I know I am."

Hong shook his head, but he was smiling. The small smile. The real one. The smile that said I'm annoyed and I'm charmed and I don't know which feeling is stronger. Est watched this exchange and felt the envy again. The clean kind. The I want this too kind.

But underneath the envy—something else. Something warmer.

Gratitude.

He was here. At this table. Eating these pancakes. Witnessing this theft of coffee and this argument about magic hands and this specific, irreplaceable morning that would never happen again in exactly this way.

He was here. And he had been invited. And he was welcome.

Maybe that was enough.

After they'd eaten—after the plates were in the sink and the fruit was back in the refrigerator and the lumpy pancakes were reduced to crumbs and fond memory—Lego pulled out his phone and made a video call.

The screen showed Tui.

He was in a car—the back seat, the landscape moving past the windows, the blur of highway and countryside visible behind him. He was wearing a faded denim jacket over a black t-shirt, his hair pushed back, his reading glasses on, a bag of chips open on his lap.

"P'Tui!" Lego's face transformed—the full smile that he deployed for the people he loved, the brightness turned up to maximum, the joy visible and unguarded.

"Lego," Tui said, his face appearing on the screen. He looked tired but happy, the specific combination of exhausted-from-travel and pleased-to-be-going-home. "Morning. You're up early."

"Where are you?" Lego asked, the phone held close to his face, his eyes tracking the movement visible in Tui's background.

"About two hours out," Tui said, his voice coming through the phone speaker slightly distorted by the car's movement and the compression of the mobile connection. "We stopped for gas. Mom called three times to ask if I've eaten. I told her yes. She didn't believe me."

"Have you eaten?"

"I'm eating chips. That counts."

"That doesn't count."

"It counts as effort. Chips are food. Potatoes are vegetables. Therefore chips are vegetables. Therefore I'm eating healthy."

"That's not how nutrition works." Lego laughed. "Have a good trip, Doggy." Lego said.

"Don't call me Doggy in front of people." Tui said, but he was smiling. The chip bag crinkled as he moved. The highway rolled past behind him, the green and brown and occasional flash of buildings, the landscape of Thailand between Bangkok and the coast.

"I'm not in front of people. I'm in front of P'Hong and P'Est. They don't count."

"We count," Hong said, appearing in the frame beside Lego. "We're very important people. We have feelings and opinions and everything."

"Hi, Hong," Tui said. "Tell Lego that chips count as breakfast."

"Chips don't count as breakfast." Hong said immediately.

"You're supposed to be on my side."

"I'm on the side of truth. Truth says chips are garbage. Delicious garbage, but garbage."

"Your support is very conditional."

"Say hi to the triplets," Lego said, his voice softening, the brightness dimming slightly into something more tender. "Tell them Uncle Lego is bringing presents next time I visit."

"What presents?" Tui asked, his expression shifting to something between amusement and concern.

"I haven't decided yet. Something loud. Something with batteries. Something that will make them happy and you miserable. That's the sweet spot of gift-giving."

"My parents will murder you."

"Your parents love me. I'm charming. I bring expensive fruit."

"You bring chaos."

"Chaos is a form of love."

"That's the most Lego thing you've ever said."

"Thank you."

"It wasn't a compliment."

"I'm choosing to interpret it as one anyway. Goodbye, Doggy! Drive safe! Eat real food!"

"Goodbye, menace." Tui said, but the affection in his voice was clear, unmistakable, the warmth cutting through the sarcasm and the playful insults and the entire protective layer of humor that both of them used to avoid saying things that were too true, too vulnerable, too close to the heart.

The call ended.

Lego set the phone down and looked at Hong with an expression that was softer than the brightness he'd been performing during the call. Not sad, exactly. But—wistful. The expression of a person thinking about something they wanted and weren't sure how to ask for.

Hong's hand reached across the table and flicked Lego's ear. Not hard. Just—a touch. A contact. A small, physical punctuation mark.

"Ow!" Lego grabbed his ear, his face shifting from wistful to indignant. "Why?"

"You looked sad. I redirected your attention."

"The redirect involved violence."

"The redirect involved affection expressed through physical contact. There's a difference."

"The difference is assault."

"The difference is love."

Lego rubbed his ear, but he was smiling.

And then Hong said something that surprised Est.

"You should go out with Tui." Hong said.

The sentence arrived at the breakfast table like a stone skipping across water—each bounce a small impact, the trajectory unexpected, the destination unclear. Lego's head turned. Est looked at Hong, confused, trying to understand what was happening, what had shifted, what conversation he had just become a witness to.

"I thought you two had something going on." Est said, gesturing between Hong and Lego with his coffee cup, the implication clear.

Hong laughed. The real laugh—short, surprised, genuinely amused. "Lego and me?"

He shook his head, the gray hair catching the light. His hand found his coffee cup—the cup Lego had been drinking from, the cup that had become communal property through repeated theft and tacit permission.

"Someday. Maybe. I don't know." Hong took a sip. His eyes were on his coffee, not on Lego, not on Est. "He's my favorite person."

The sentence was simple. Direct.

Lego smiled at Hong's words. The smile was warm but complicated, the expression of a person hearing something beautiful and feeling something painful and containing both in the same face.

"I'd be embarrassed to try something and fail," Lego said quietly. His voice had lost some of its brightness, had shifted into a register that was more private, more vulnerable. "I've only ever seen P'Tui go out with girls."

The sentence sat between them.

"And even though I look like this—" Lego gestured at himself. The gesture encompassed everything: the loose hair, the bare face, the pink pajamas, the long nails, the body that defied every conventional expectation of what a twenty-year-old

man was supposed to look like, the presentation that was simultaneously masculine and feminine and neither and both. "—I'm still a boy. A man. Whatever. And I don't know if that's what P'Tui wants. If that's what he's looking for. If I'm even—compatible with his desire."

Hong's hand moved.

The hand that had been circling Lego's back in the bed, that had been tracing patterns on skin in sleep, that had expressed affection through touch for so long it had become automatic—reached across the table and ruffled Lego's hair.

The gesture was gentle. Playful. The physical equivalent of I love you and you're being ridiculous and both things are true.

"Don't worry, darling," Hong said. His voice had shifted again, back to the lighter register, the affectionate sarcasm that was his default mode of expressing care. "We'll get married if we don't find someone better by forty."

Lego swatted his hand away. "Your proposals need work."

"That wasn't a proposal. That was a contingency plan."

"P'Hong." Lego looked at him. The enormous eyes, warm and amused and slightly wet at the edges—the wet that could have been laughter or could have been something else, something more complicated. "If we get married at forty, I want a prenup that guarantees me custody of P'Nut."

"P'Nut isn't a possession."

"P'Nut is a shared resource. I want him on weekdays."

"You can have him on weekdays if I get Tui on weekends."

"Deal."

"Deal."

They shook hands across the table. The gesture was mock-serious, the performance of a contract negotiation, the humor sitting comfortably alongside the genuine affection underneath.

The envy was still there. The clean kind. The I want that too kind.

But underneath it—something else.

Understanding.

He thought about the envy he had felt in the bed. The clean envy. The I want that too envy.

And he realized that the wanting was not separate from the having.

He was already here. Already at the table, eating the pancakes, witnessing the ruffled hair and the stolen coffee and the contingency-plan proposal. He was already inside the warmth. He had already been invited. He was already participating.

He just hadn't noticed because he'd been too busy looking for something else. Too busy searching for the blur, for the answer, for the person who had touched him in the dark. Too busy being afraid that the invitation was temporary to realize that the invitation had already been extended. Multiple times. In multiple ways.

Come to the rooftop. Come to the studio. Come to dinner. Come back. Stay.

He had been given the belonging he was afraid to ask for.

He just needed to accept it.

The next few days, Est ignored social media.

The decision was deliberate. Conscious. A choice made with the full awareness that avoiding the internet would not make the internet go away, would not stop the discourse or the analysis or the specific, relentless machinery of public opinion, but would at least create a buffer, a space, a room where he could exist without being constantly reminded that one million people had opinions about his face.

But Dana kept him informed.

"What about Kai?" Est asked. "What about the clip?"

"Buried," Dana said. The single word carried satisfaction. "Not gone—nothing on the internet is ever truly gone—but buried. The algorithm has moved on. The attention has shifted. People are talking about the new images instead of the old scandal. Which is exactly what we wanted."

"For how long?"

"Until the next thing arrives. Maybe a week. Maybe a month. The internet's attention span is short. Our job is to make sure that when they think about you, they see the image we want them to see rather than the image Kai's narrative created."

"That's exhausting."

"That's the industry," Dana said. "But you're doing well, Est. Better than well. The agency is very pleased. They want to book you for more campaigns. Print, digital, possibly some video work. Your value has increased significantly since the Untouchable release."

"That's good," Est said.

"It is good. Very good. Use this momentum. Build on it. And—" Dana paused. The pause was deliberate. "Take care of yourself. You sound tired."

"I'm always tired."

"You sound more tired than usual. Are you sleeping?"

"Yes."

"Are you eating?"

"Yes."

"Are you lying to me?"

"Partially."

Dana sighed. "Est," she said. "I'm saying this as your manager and as someone who cares about you: don't burn out. The industry will take everything you give it and ask for more. You have to be the one who sets the boundaries. You have to be the one who says no, that's enough, I need rest. Because no one else will say it for you."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"I'm learning."

"Good. Keep learning. And call me if you need anything. Anything at all."

The call ended.

Est sat in his apartment.

The group chat was active.

Hong: The agency sent me concept photos for the campaign. I look like a sportswear advertisement.

Lego: You ARE a sportswear advertisement. That's literally the job.

Hong: I know. But I was hoping for something more... rebellious.

Lego: You're wearing Adidas. Revolution comes in three stripes.

Nut: That's actually a good tagline.

Hong: Don't encourage him.

Nut: Est, are you reading this?

Est: Yes.

Nut: Thoughts?

Est: Lego's right.

Hong: Don't encourage him.

Est: I'm not encouraging. I'm agreeing.

Lego: P'EST AGREES WITH ME. THIS IS NOW CANON. SCREENSHOT THIS. PRINT IT. FRAME IT.

Hong: You're both exhausting.

Est read every message. He didn't always respond—his participation was still quieter than the others', still the read-receipt version of presence rather than the active, constant, multi-message engagement that Lego and Hong maintained—but he read them with the attention he applied to things that mattered.

And they mattered.

And Est was part of it.

Not the center. Not the loudest voice. But—part of it.

The week passed in this rhythm: mornings in the apartment, coffee alone, reading the group chat. Afternoons with Dana—contract negotiations, campaign discussions, the machinery of his career continuing to operate whether or not he was actively participating. Evenings on his balcony, smoking, watching the city, thinking about the blur and the mystery and the question that still hadn't been answered.

And then—

Thursday.

The Adidas shoot.

Dana picked Est up in the morning.

The car was familiar now—the black sedan, the leather interior, the specific smell of Dana's perfume and the faint, residual coffee from her morning routine.

Hong was already in the back seat.

Slouched against the door, phone in hand, the silver rings tapping against the

screen as he typed something—probably into the group chat, probably something sarcastic, probably something that would make Lego laugh and make Nut sigh and make the whole ecosystem continue its daily operation.

"Is it going to become a habit for us to come pick you up?" Dana asked, glancing in the rearview mirror at Hong.

"If you hate me, just say so." Hong replied without looking up from his phone.

"I don't hate you."

"You make a face every time I get in the car."

"That's not a hate face. That's just my face."

"Your face has opinions."

"All faces have opinions. Mine are just better articulated."

"Did you just make a face joke?"

"I manage models. Face jokes are professional development."

"That was almost funny, Dana."

"Thank you."

"Almost. Not quite. But the trajectory is promising. Keep working on it. Maybe by next year you'll achieve actual humor."

Est smiled. The real smile. The one that moved muscles above the cheekbone.

They drove through morning Bangkok—the traffic thicker now, the Chinese New Year exodus reversed, the population returned, the city back to its usual density.

They arrived at the company building.

The building was fuller now—the lobbies and corridors and elevators populated with the usual density of people who worked in the entertainment industry: models, photographers, stylists, managers, assistants, the entire ecosystem of production and promotion and profit.

They went to the cafeteria first.

Dana split off toward colleagues—other managers, other professionals, the tablet already out, the professional mode fully engaged. She moved through the space with the confidence of someone who belonged there, who had earned her place through competence and consistency and the specific, relentless commitment to doing her job better than anyone expected.

Est and Hong sat at a table near the windows—coffees in hand, the pre-shoot calm settling over them like a familiar coat.

"It's my first job with more models," Est said. He looked around the cafeteria—at the other tables, the other people, the conversations happening in Thai and English and the specific industry hybrid that mixed both languages into a single, functional dialect. "Here in Thailand, I mean. I've done group shoots in New York, but they were different. Everyone was—professional. Distant. You performed the chemistry for the camera and then you never saw each other again. Like actors in a play that closed after one performance."

"Don't worry too much," Hong said, sipping his coffee. "Most people here are too busy finishing work and moving on to the next thing to pay much attention to you. They won't care. Maybe they'll ask for photos—you have a lot of followers and now you're viral—but that's just industry networking. It doesn't mean anything."

Est looked at him, amused. "You're viral too."

Hong laughed—the short burst. "I'll be viral when my music goes viral. When someone shares a clip of one of my guitar pieces and it gets a million views and people actually listen instead of just looking. Going viral because of a photo doesn't bother me much. Photos are other people's creation. The photographer's vision, the stylist's choices, the editor's decisions. I'm just the body they used to execute their ideas. Music is different. Music is mine. When someone goes viral sharing a clip of my playing—"

He tapped the table once, the ring clinking against the surface, the sound small and sharp and deliberate.

"—then I'll care. Then it'll matter. Because that's me. Not the version of me someone else created. Just—me."

"That's surprisingly philosophical for 9 AM." Est said.

The third floor. The corridor was busy with rolling racks of clothing—the Adidas gear, the three-stripe signature visible on every piece, the black and white and occasional pops of color, the aesthetic of movement and athleticism and the specific, aspirational optimism that sportswear brands sold alongside their products.

Athletic. Casual. The aesthetic of bodies in motion.

And at the end of the corridor, surrounded by both managers—Dana on one side, P'Kwan on the other—Lego.

"I can't believe it." Hong said, stopping mid-stride, his voice carrying genuine surprise.

"What?" Est asked.

"My manager. Smiling."

Est looked.

P'Kwan was, indeed, smiling. At Lego.

The expression was small but real, the professional mask softened by genuine warmth, the specific look that people gave Lego when he was being himself, when the brightness was deployed not as performance but as offering, when the joy was infectious enough to breach even the most carefully maintained professional boundaries.

Lego was talking—hands moving in the air. His hair was in a ponytail—high, no makeup, no contacts, no enhancement. His real face was visible: the small moles scattered across his cheeks, the freckles that usually disappeared under foundation, the slight asymmetry of his features that made him look more human and less like the carefully edited version that appeared in his social media photos.

He was wearing comfortable clothes—athletic shorts, a loose t-shirt, a zip-up hoodie over everything, a crossbody bag slung across his body. His nose piercing was hidden—the septum ring flipped up inside his nose. His ears were bare—earrings removed, the piercings empty, the holes visible but unadorned.

Without the jewelry and the makeup and the platform boots and the carefully constructed aesthetic, he looked—young. Like a college student. Like someone's younger brother. Like a twenty-year-old man waiting for a lecture rather than a performer who had suspended himself from a ceiling and defied gravity in front of three hundred people.

Est laughed softly.

"Lego could charm a wall." Est said.

They approached.

Lego saw them. His face transformed—the brightness increasing, the smile widening, the whole person lighting up like a lamp being turned on, like someone had increased the voltage.

"P'Hong! P'Est!" He waved. The gesture was enthusiastic, unselfconscious, the kind of wave that a child gives, the full-arm, full-body motion that communicated joy without any concern for how it looked.

Behind them, in the hallway: more models.

Est counted quickly. Six. Seven. Eight people in various stages of preparation—some

in regular clothes, some already in Adidas gear, some being herded toward the styling area by assistants with clipboards and schedules and the harried expressions of people trying to coordinate too many moving parts simultaneously.

Est was nervous.

The nervousness was unfamiliar. He didn't usually get nervous before shoots. Shoots were work. Work was something he knew how to do. Work was the territory where he was competent, where the performance was clear, where the expectations were knowable and meetable and where success meant executing the brief without deviation or complaint.

But this was different.

He wanted the shoot to be good. Actually good. Not just technically competent or commercially successful, but—enjoyable. He wanted to enjoy it.

He had never wanted to enjoy his job before. His job was the thing he endured, the means, the price he paid for the apartment and the freedom and the life he was building, the transaction he had accepted years ago when he decided that being looked at was easier than being known.

But today—

Today, he wanted it to be different. He wanted the shoot to feel like the breakfast in Lego's kitchen, like the cigarettes on the balcony, like the mornings where people touched each other's ears and stole each other's coffee and made imperfect pancakes and called it love.

He wanted work to feel less like work.

They went to wardrobe.

The Adidas gear was laid out on tables and racks—organized by size, by style. Shorts, sweatshirts, tank tops, sneakers, socks, the full uniform of athletic aspiration.

Hong emerged from the changing area in his outfit: a matching shorts-and-sweatshirt set, black with white stripes running down the sides. Even the socks were Adidas—branded, coordinated, part of the total look. White sneakers, pristine, the kind that had clearly never been worn for actual athletic activity.

He looked—

"Normal." Lego said, examining him with the critical eye of someone who had strong opinions about aesthetics and wasn't afraid to share them.

"Don't say it like it's a diagnosis." Hong said.

"Isn't this your style?" Est asked, adjusting his own outfit—a black tank top, running shorts, the stripped-down, athletic aesthetic that was simultaneously simpler and more exposing than anything he'd worn professionally in months.

"I only wear clothes like this for what I hate most," Hong said, looking down at himself with an expression that suggested he was examining a prison uniform rather than a luxury sportswear brand.

"Which is?" Lego asked.

"Burning off the calories from delicious food."

Est smiled. He couldn't help it.

Makeup was lighter than usual—the natural kind. Less product, less time, less of the heavy, theatrical application the Untouchable shoot had demanded.

When the makeup artists finished and left—moving on to the next model, the next face, the next canvas—Est and Hong stood to one side of the studio, watching. Other models were being photographed in groups—two at a time, three at a time.

Girls in fitted sportswear demonstrating stretches. Guys without shirts showing the muscle definition that came from hours in the gym and careful dietary control and the genetic lottery and the specific, exhausting discipline that the industry demanded and that the cameras made look effortless.

The energy was different from the Untouchable shoot—looser, warmer, faster. The photographer was moving quickly, catching moments rather than constructing them, the aesthetic more documentary than editorial, more alive than austere.

Lego appeared in front of them.

He was in his outfit now: a black athletic skirt—the kind with built-in compression shorts, functional rather than decorative—and a white Adidas tank top, fitted, the three stripes visible on the side. Matching white socks that came up to mid-calf. White sneakers.

The skirt was short. The tank top was fitted. The combination was athletic and aesthetic and unmistakably Lego—the alternative body in the mainstream campaign, the person who reshaped the mold by refusing to acknowledge that the mold existed.

He stuck close to Hong immediately. Leaned on his shoulder. "It's boring." Lego whispered.

Hong looked at him. "You've been here twenty minutes."

"Twenty boring minutes."

Est laughed.

The sound surprised him. Again.

Lego beamed. Hong looked at Est with the expression of a person who had just witnessed something they didn't expect and were deciding whether to comment on it.

"What?" Est said.

"Nothing," Hong said. "You laughed. With your actual face. In a professional setting. I'm just—noting it. For the record. For posterity. For the eventual documentary about your emotional evolution."

"People laugh." Est said.

"People laugh. You don't. You usually do the thing—" Hong demonstrated. He produced a precise, controlled, mouth-only smile that moved approximately zero facial muscles above the cheekbone, the expression so accurate, so precise, that it was clear Hong had been watching. "—that. The model laugh. The 'I acknowledge that humor has occurred' laugh. The laugh that doesn't require feeling."

"That's not what I do."

"That's exactly what you do. I've seen you do it seventeen times. Maybe more. I stopped counting after seventeen because counting past seventeen requires more effort than I'm willing to invest in tracking your emotional suppression."

"You've been counting?" Est asked, genuinely surprised.

"I count things that concern me."

"My laugh concerns you?"

"Your lack of laugh concerned me. The presence of an actual laugh is—" Hong paused. Chose his word carefully. "—encouraging."

"Encouraging?"

"Don't make me say nice things, Est. I have a reputation to maintain. A reputation built on years of cultivated cynicism and carefully deployed sarcasm. If I start being openly supportive, people will think I've been replaced by a pod person. They'll start asking questions. They'll demand proof of life. It'll be a whole thing."

"Your reputation is being sarcastic," Est said.

"My reputation is being honest. The sarcasm is packaging. The honesty is the

product. I'm not mean—I'm accurate. There's a difference."

"That's actually—" Est started.

"Don't say it."

"—wise."

"I said don't say it." Hong turned away, but the smile was there. He was enjoying this. He expected it to last forever, probably. He expected that good things, once found, would never end.

Est looked at Hong. Really looked. At the gray hair and the dark eyes and the silver rings and the person underneath the Rebel persona, the person who counted laughs and noticed absences and who showed up at 7:48 AM to help navigate a crisis because that's what friends did.

The photographer called them back.

"Est! Hong! You're up!"

The session was about to begin.

Est felt the nervousness return. But underneath it—something else.

Anticipation.